



Middle Eastern reactions to the war in Ukraine: strategic selfishness or a prelude to evolving multipolarism?

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As the Russian invasion of Ukraine continues in full gear, contrary to the steadfast reactions of the western world, the regional responses from the Middle East paint a different picture. Having initially been caught off-guard with the intensifying tag between Russia and the west, most 'heavyweight' MENA countries have adopted a 'sit tight and assess' approach. Longstanding partners of the west are balancing their reactions in order to minimize the risks stemming from overtly picking sides in a conflict that they increasingly see as not their own. On the region's eastern flank, Iran too, walks a thin line.

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As the principal US ally in the region, one could think that Israel would side unequivocally with the West in demonstrating its solidarity with Ukraine. However, despite the increasing anti-war voices domestically, Tel Aviv has avoided crossing the Rubicon against Russia. Since the Russians anchored in Syria to help stabilize the Syrian regime in 2015, the Israelis consider them as the primary power in their northern neighborhood. In the words of the Israeli FM Yair Lapid that “we have a kind of border with Russia”, the care with which Israel calculates its attitude is evident. The country depends on Russia’s willingness in turning a blind eye to the IAF’s bombing of Iranian convoys inside Syria before they reach Hizballah’s hands in Lebanon.¹ After initially issuing a rather feeble statement in support of Ukraine’s territorial integrity, Israel finally condemned the attack via its foreign minister and voted in favor of the relevant resolution at the UN General Assembly. At the same time, it has been very careful not to get involved in the military aspect of the conflict by not allowing the Baltic states to export Israeli military hardware to Ukraine.² Furthermore, it has long been ‘creative’ in aligning with the western sanctions, more so since many sanctioned Russian oligarchs hold Israeli passports and maintain property and investments in Israel. The country has not officially joined the sanctions and has avoided passing any regulation that would obstruct Israeli business with Russia.³ Its ‘balanced’ reactions may also be rooted in domestic political reasons. Israel has a large constituency of Russian-speaking Jews who migrated from areas of the former Soviet Union in the 1990s and comprise nearly 15 percent of its population. Assuming an explicitly anti-Russian stance could stoke political polarization that many in the government would like to avoid in Israeli society. In contrast, Israel has opted to emphasize the humanitarian aspect of its solidarity and has even assumed a mediator’s role upon the request of the Ukrainian President, which allows it to temporarily dodge the pressure of adopting a more rigid position. In addition, officials have stated that Israel welcomes Jewish and non-Jewish Ukrainians fleeing the war. Such a move is entirely in line with the state’s open-door policy for diaspora Jews, albeit it may be very ironic for many of these refugees who flee war and Russian occupation to end up in occupied Palestinian territories. In fact, if recent reports are true, this is already happening and certainly suits new Israeli strategies of demographic engineering that effectively turn refugees into settlers.⁴

Saudi Arabia and the UAE have kept a low profile responding to the events in Ukraine. They both voted against the attack in the UN General Assembly but the UAE – who serve as a non-permanent member of the Security Council – abstained on a vote to condemn the Russian intervention. Most importantly, they have so far remained committed to their agreements with Russia in the framework of OPEC plus, and thus unresponsive to western calls for raising their oil production to help stabilize global prices.⁵ Moscow’s increasing economic, energy, and security cooperation with the Gulf powers during the last decade may account for a partial explanation of the latter’s’ stance. The Emiratis, especially, share common views with Russia on several geopolitical issues in Libya and most recently Syria. Yet, the nature of the monarchies’ relationships with Russia remains mostly transactional, compared to that with the US. In essence, what keeps them from jeopardizing these relationships is rather an ongoing effort to carve their independent foreign policies in view of an increasingly multipolar international system. The US slow – but nonetheless occurring – pivot to Asia, their seeming return to the JCPOA with Iran, the ill-planned withdrawal from Afghanistan, the recently unresolved response to Houthi drone attacks on Saudi and Emirati territory, and the refusal to designate the Houthis in Yemen as a terrorist organization have hampered America’s posture as the Gulf’s committed security guarantor.⁶ Moreover, and with their eyes on Yemen and Iran, the monarchies may tacitly acknowledge Russia’s stated strategic anxiety about the expansion of ‘threatening powers’ in its near abroad. Even if they do not publicly endorse Putin’s way of dealing with NATO’s expansion, they certainly do not feel that they should be dragged by the West deeper into a conflict that is not of their immediate concern.

The Emiratis keep communication channels with Russia open and also continue to pursue their regional agenda even in areas where US opposition is stark. The recent welcome of Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad in Abu Dhabi is indicative. Moreover, Abu Dhabi’s Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan may feel he is entitled to some leniency from the Americans due to his role in the

recent signing of the Abraham Accords with Israel. For Saudi Arabia – apart from the above-mentioned foreign policy and economic rationale which it shares more or less with the UAE – the response to the US ‘rally around the sanctions’ calls has also been somewhat of a personal matter. The relationship between President Biden and the Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MBS) has been in tatters. Biden, during his election campaign vowed to treat the Kingdom as a ‘pariah’ due to MBS’s alleged implication in the murder of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi. Since then, the two leaders have not communicated directly. Even if Biden has ultimately been far from keeping his promise, MBS would probably want to obtain serious recognition and support before the Kingdom moves in any way against Putin, let alone relinquish its commitments to the OPEC+ agreement.⁷

The other ‘big player’ of the Arab world, Egypt, has also struggled to act neutral. Called by Egypt itself, the Arab League meeting of March 1, tellingly failed to condemn Russia and paid lip service to de-escalation and dialogue. Particularly since Sisi’s rise to power, Russian arms supplies have helped Egypt to diversify away from US military material, security cooperation with Russia in Libya is of paramount importance, and cooperation is flourishing in the fields of nuclear energy and industrial developments in the Suez Canal. Additionally, the cultivation of a personal relationship between Sisi and Putin has helped the former to absorb western pressure on the issue of human rights abuses. After all, the model of the omnipotent ‘strongman’ that Putin represents has a rather strong appeal among autocrats such as Sisi, in addition to building their political legitimacy. Most importantly though, Egypt, as the largest importer of wheat in the world, is dependent on Russia -and to a lesser extent Ukraine- for roughly 80 per cent of its imports. With bread being located at the very top of the Egyptians’ nutritional habits, potential shortages in wheat supply may have severe implications. Only recently in 2017 and 2011, the hike in bread prices, coupled with the cut of state subsidies, sparked wide protests all across the country.⁸ Finally, apart from the motives that keep state-level reactions to the Ukraine invasion mild, one should take into account the fact that the Arab streets have kept relatively quiet over the tragedy that has engulfed Ukraine. The double standards on the western coverage of the Ukrainian refugee crisis, in comparison to the refugees from the Middle East are not going unnoticed.⁹ The same applies to the US and western condemnation of Russia when paralleled with the tacit acceptance of 55 years of Israeli occupation and annexation of large Palestinian territories. Therefore, for the Egyptian rulers, the fact that by not following the US line they don’t have to account to their people for succumbing to western double standards is rather convenient.

At this point, a special mention to Iran is in order. While popular opposition to the Russian attack is reportedly high, Iran’s Supreme Leader has publicly blamed the crisis on the US and NATO expansionism to the East.¹⁰ Tehran has been careful, thought, not to throw its weight behind Russia and has solely called for dialogue and restraint. It did not recognize the Russian proclaimed ‘independence’ of the Donetsk and Luhansk Republics, thus keeping in line with the policy it followed back in 2014 with Crimea and in 2008 with South Ossetia and Abkhazia in Georgia.¹¹ This does not mean that the country has moved away from its relationship with Russia. The war, however, comes at a very sensitive time when the negotiations about the revival of the JCPOA in Vienna are reportedly in their final stages. Tehran struggles with heavy economic sanctions and considers it rather prudent to avoid irritating the Europeans, especially in a moment when all sides -the US included- want a swift conclusion. In fact, it may try to ride the momentum as the Biden administration desperately needs a foreign policy win to present both domestically and internationally, while Iranian oil and gas exports could contribute to great extent to the European energy diversification from Russian dependence. The Iranian Foreign Minister’s visit to Moscow following the latter’s’ last-minute demand to receive guarantees in the JCPOA about the unsanctioned continuity of its economic, energy, and trade relationships with Iran further highlights Tehran’s determination to keep the negotiations from falling victim to the conflict between the West and Russia.¹² That way, the relationship with Russia as a partner of paramount importance was reassured, and Iran demonstrated plainly its current diplomatic priorities.

To conclude, the ways major Middle East countries try to balance between long-term alliances and the varying levels of Russian influence, reveal firstly that they do not see the conflict as their own.

Secondly, and most essentially, they reveal that these countries fathom an opportunity to hedge their bets into what they see as a rapidly evolving multipolar world. As the war is still raging though, it would be premature to conclude that Israel, the two Gulf countries and Egypt will continue to navigate the same way in the months to come. Much will depend on how much pressure the US – and to some extent the Europeans – will be willing to exert and what incentives they will give in order to persuade them to engage more actively in the Ukrainian conflict. For Iran as well, much will depend on how the negotiations for the JCPOA will conclude. A potential failure to reach an agreement could push Tehran even closer to Moscow, a fact that could even mean a pro-Russian recalibration of its stance on Ukraine. All in all, one thing has so far been clear; for the 'Middle East's big', their responses in the Ukrainian war have been more tailored to their mid-term strategic calculus, rather than on Ukraine.

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